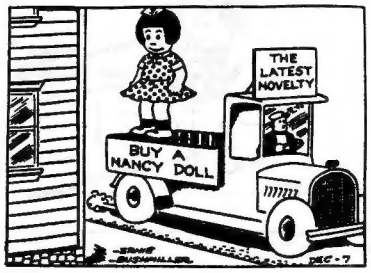

COMIX WAVE
BY CLAY GEERDES ©88
NANCY, WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE MY UNDERGROUND COMIX COLLECTION?
* WITH APOLOGIES TO ERNIE BUSHMILLER
D.Miller

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ERNIE BUSHMILLER AND NANCY

Brian Walker's **THE BEST OF ERNIE BUSHMILLER'S NANCY** has come out in time for the old Christmas market. This is a high quality paperback, designed for the fan and the cartoonist. If you were ever into Nancy's strange trip, you'll enjoy seeing this collection.

Ernest Paul Bushmiller was born in the South Bronx near 137th Street on August 23, 1905, the middle child, sandwiched between on older and a younger sister. His father, Ernie Senior, was a German immigrant, an artist who used to give chalk talks on the vaudeville circuit. His mother, Elizabeth Hall, was Irish. Ernie quit school after the eighth grade and went to work as a copy boy for the New York Evening **WORLD**. He was 14. It was 1919, just after the first World War. At night, Ernie studied at the National Academy of Design, keeping his studies secret until he was ready to show the guys in the art room what he could do. Someone thought he had talent or he wouldn't have been assigned to sweep up in the art room, the first step on the ladder to becoming a cartoonist in the 1920s. Coulton Waugh wrote in 1947, "The theory which seems to have worked out very well, was that by being around the other artists and seeing their work, your own work would gradually acquire polish and finish (**THE COMICS**, p. 137)." Waugh saw Bushmiller as "a very talented cartoonist with a dry, economical style, an uncluttered art sense refreshing to see; there are no scratchy pen thistles to hurt your eyes in his work (137)." Ernie's breakthrough came when he was assigned to illustrate a Sunday feature on Houdini's tricks called *Red Magic*. Though Ernie ghosted *Fritzi Ritz* as early as 1925, the strip carried the name of it's creator Larry Whitington until late 1929.

Fritzi Ritz was one of many imitations of the character referred to by Coulton Waugh, earliest historian of the comic strips, as a French Doll. French women gained a certain mystique in America due to the experiences young American soldiers had with them during the first World War (1914-17). To understand the character, compare it to previous depictions of women in the comic strips, say to the mother of the Katzenjammer Kids. It was Cliff Sterrett who established the character in *Polly and Her Pals*. Russ Westover carried her on into the second world war in *Tillie The Toiler*. Chic Young did her as *Dumb Dora* who was later restyled into Blondie Boopadoup, the flapper who married rich Dagwood Bumstead and caused his fall into the middle class. Bushmiller quickly lost interest in Fritzi and brought her niece Nancy into the strip as a device for his gags. It was not long before Nancy was the focus of the strip and Fritzi was consigned to the role of an adult reactor. Waugh described Nancy as "an engaging chunk of little girl, with contented eyes and a very personal and neat black sponge of hair with a minute, white hair ribbon snugged on top (138)." Jerry Robinson called her "an obstreperous little girl with black prickly hair (*THE COMICS*, 1974, p. 168.)." Martin Sheridan, who interviewed Bushmiller for his 1942 collection, *CLASSIC COMICS AND THEIR CREATORS*, said it was Milt Gross who advised Ernie to drop Fritzi and Make Nancy his major, but Sheridan quotes both 1931 and 1938 as the date. It was probably 1938, since Nancy became the strip title in 1940. Gross and Bushmiller were close friends. They had a studio together in the Chrysler Building for awhile after the **World** was sold in 1931. *Fritzi Ritz* might have become a more serious and detailed career girl strip a la *Dixie Dugan* and *Ella Cinders*, but Bushmiller bucked the trend and turned Nancy into a successful kid strip, one which lead the way for John Stanley's *Little Lulu* [originated in the Saturday Evening Post as a panel gag by Marge Henderson in 1932] and Charles Schulz's *Peanuts*. Nancy's "gags are absolutely unsophisticated and unembroidered; they are humor on an almost primitive, childlike level," commented Sheridan. Certainly Nancy was too unsophisticated for an aesthete like Bill Blackbeard who excluded any mention of her or Bushmiller from his *Smithsonian Collection of Newspaper Comics* and contributed two rather negative pieces re artist and strip to the Maurice Horn *Encyclopedia of the Comics*.

Lest you think Nancy was inspired by a little Bushmiller, it must be noted that Ernie and Abby never had any children of their own. Whence Nancy? Well, I suspect she was inspired by Darla Hood of the Little Rascals, just as I suspect a memory of Jackie Coogan as *The Kid* resulted in the creation of Sluggo. Sheridan noted that Ernie used to play hookey from the office and spend his afternoons going from picture show to picture show. The major film star of the mid-thirties was Shirley Temple, a fact that had a lot to do with the success of the little girl strips, but Nancy's early brillo pad hairdo is closer to Darla than to Shirley. Ernie was an ardent movie fan and when his strip featured Fritzi in Hollywood, it caught the attention of Harold Lloyd, resulting in Ernie's time in Hollywood as a gag writer. The various comic historians don't seem to understand just why Ernie left Hollywood and returned to New York, but knowing how writers are treated by the movie industry I understand it. A writer in Hollywood is one cut above the janitor or the guy who parks your car. No status at all. Back in New York, Ernie was on his way to fame as a cartoonist and he had the support of his fellow artists.

Ernie supposedly wrote gags for Lloyd in 1930 for *MOVIE CRAZY*. Perhaps some were used, perhaps not.

MOVIE CRAZY wasn't shot until May of 1932. It was released in September of that year. Bushmiller was given no credit, but he wouldn't have been. Lloyd's regular writer/director, Clyde Bruckner got credit. Story credits went to Agnes Christine Johnson, John Grey, and Felix Adler. The scene in the film that might well have come from Bushmiller is the one in which Lloyd accidently put on a magician's coat and went onto the dance floor. Naturally, all sorts of things began to happen. A rabbit appeared on a diner's plate, etc. Ernie might have come up with this gag in memory of his early work for Houdini on *Red Magic*. On the other hand it is possible that Lloyd simply put Bushmiller on the payroll for awhile, found he didn't work out, and that was the end of it. Brian Walker says Ernie got $250 a week for gags on *MOVIE CRAZY* and that Bushmiller returned to the Bronx in 1932, but he doesn't give his source. I assume he interviewed Bushmiller, but he doesn't say when or where. Neither Richard Schickel [*THE SHAPE OF LAUGHTER*, 1974] nor Tom Dardis [*HAROLD LLOYD: THE MAN ON THE CLOCK*] refer to any participation by Bushmiller in the writing of *MOVIE CRAZY*.

Blackbeard might not have liked Nancy, but the readers did. In a 1962 survey by Edward J. Robinson and David Manning White, Nancy placed 9th out of 128 strips ("Who Readers the Funnies--and Why?" reprinted in *THE FUNNIES*, London: Macmillan, 1963, pp. 179-89.). In *COMICS: ANATOMY OF A MASS MEDIUM*, Reinhold Reitberger and Wolfgang Fuchs saw Nancy only as a strip for girls and ignored Fritzi Ritz entirely (36). George Perry and Alan Aldridge ignored Nancy in *THE PENGUIN BOOK OF THE COMICS* (1967), yet showed Carl Anderson's *Henry* and Schulz' *Peanuts*. Schulz owes a big debt to Bushmiller. His first *Peanuts* strips appeared in *Tip Top* in 1949 when that title was running *Nancy and Fritzi Ritz* regularly. Watterson's dream and fantasy sequences in *Calvin and Hobbes* also owe a debt to Nancy's surrealism.

Ernie Bushmiller died of a heart attack at his home in Stamford, Connecticut, on August 15, 1982. He was one of the founders of the National Cartoonists' Society, an organization which grew out of a camp show put on in 1944 by the American Theater Wing. The big seven who entertained the troops included Bushmiller and Otto Soglow, Milton Caniff, Russell Patterson, Rube Goldberg, C.D. Russell, and Gus Edson (Sheridan, 286).

Those who read the Walker book may be surprised at the ingenuity of Bushmiller and the playful attitude he took toward his characters and their world. I've heard the strip called simple, but suggest those who think so try to draw it sometime. To me, it was extremely well planned and executed, and I think Bushmiller was wise not to turn it into a career girl strip. Hey, where is *Tillie The Toiler* these days? *Dixie Dugan*? The only one of those strips that survived was Dale Messick's *Brenda Starr*.

Nancy is still in syndication in various parts of the world, but I hate the way she is being drawn so will leave any discussion of the current strip to those who feel more kindly toward it. C. G.